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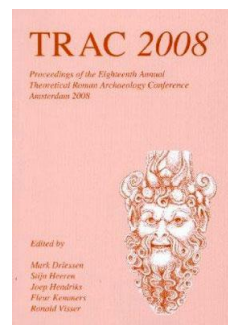
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The Dichotomy in Romano-Celtic Syncretism: Some Preliminary Thoughts on Vernacular Religion

D. Martin Goldberg

Introduction

Any attempt to add yet another term to the proliferation of terminology currently available to Roman archaeology should be approached with trepidation. However, dichotomies persist in the study of religion in the Roman Empire, despite the advances of the last decade with the introduction of post-colonial theory, hybridisation, the deconstruction of ethnicity and the recent focus on identity. Ethnic terminology creating essentialist binary oppositions is especially problematic for the study of Romano-Celtic syncretism. The concept of vernacular religion has been used in the modern ethnographic study of religious folklife to provide a reflexive methodology for reconceptualising existing classifications and highlighting the materiality of religious practice (Primiano 1995). Vernacular religion is proposed here as having similar potential for advancing the study of the hybridised religious practices of the Roman provinces. Hybridisation as the continuous generative process underlying cultural synthesis can be integrated with vernacular religion, in order to transcend the interpretative dichotomy between Roman and Native and provide a useful alternative to syncretism.

“Vernacular religion is, by definition, religion as it is lived; as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” [my emphasis] (Primiano 1995: 44). The network of relationships that people use to construct their everyday existence, their identity and ultimately their world-view, includes their own interpretation of reality, their own encounter with the divine; their own vernacular religion. Methodologically, vernacular religion focuses on ritualised practices and the contextual analysis of material culture, rather than basing interpretation on assumed ethnic characteristics or other dichotomous categories. The concept of vernacular religion strives to recognise the complexity of cult worship in the Roman provinces. Complexity does not necessarily mystify interpretation, but rather provides “a better guide to the territory” (Woolf 2000: 620) than Romano-Celtic syncretism.

Roman and Native in Romano-Celtic Syncretism

The critique of Romanisation is well known (see papers in Mattingly 1997), and scholars of Roman archaeology should easily comprehend similar criticism of the dichotomous approaches to syncretism. Romanisation has been conceived as an assimilative process, a charge that can be equally aimed at modern conceptions of syncretism when defined as “uniting pieces of the mythical history of two different traditions in one that continued to be ordered by a single system” (Roger Bastide quoted in Nederveen Pieterse 2001: 223). Although defined by the Oxford Dictionary of English as, ‘the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures or schools of thought’, there is usually a hierarchical organisation of the component elements in syncretism, especially in colonial or imperial contexts. The negative, assimilative and essentialist connotations of syncretism have been difficult to shake off. A series

of related dichotomies emerge from the study of Romano-Celtic syncretism. These include top-down Romanist versus bottom-up nativist approaches (Webster 2001), further accentuated by a Romanisation-resistance dichotomy in studies that alternately emphasise elite emulation (Bendlin 1997) or subaltern resistance (Webster 1995).

The nativist approach to Romano-Celtic syncretism, which emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century, attempted to counter-balance the elite classical orientation of the Romanisation paradigm (Webster 2001: 212). However, accentuating the native or Celtic side of the equation did little to resolve the dichotomy between Roman and native. King's suggestion that religion in the Roman provinces became "culturally Roman while remaining ethnically Celtic" (1990: 237) illustrates the same problems as the Romanisation model, especially through perpetuating dichotomous ethnic constructs. The intervening years have seen the deconstruction of ethnicity (Jones 1997) and a focus on identity in Roman studies (Pitts 2007), but the most recent re-consideration of King's thesis (King and Haussler 2007), demonstrates how these important issues are still problematic in the study of Romano-Celtic syncretism. In discussing the formation of Romano-Celtic religion(s) (King and Haussler 2007: 7–12) many pertinent questions are asked about: changes in representation and appearance of cult practice, the effects of epigraphy, architecturally augmented sacred space, the interaction between religion and socio-political structures and attendant issues of linguistic, conceptual and site continuity. Was "the essence of Celtic religion...preserved into the Roman period with just a veneer of 'Romanized' cult practice on top?" (King and Haussler 2007: 10; cf. Forcey 1997: 17). Religion is acknowledged as being at the forefront of wider social change with the emergence of Romano-Celtic religion promoting a new imposed value system, rather than traditional values (King and Haussler 2007: 10). Despite these important questions and insights, King and Haussler re-formulate the ethno-cultural definition from King's 1990 paper, suggesting that,

'...this period of change had the effect of preserving the under-lying belief system. Since Celtic religion was capable of absorbing Roman values nearly everywhere Celtic cults survived in Romano-Celtic form. In essence Romano-Celtic religion was culturally Roman while remaining Celtic in tradition.' (King and Haussler 2007: 10)

This later formulation has changed little in 17 years with Celtic ethnicity being replaced by Celtic tradition, but still using ethnic descriptive terms and retaining the 'essence' of Celtic spirit that many scholars have become wary of (Merriman 1987; Fitzpatrick 1991). Although it is perhaps unfair to use these quotes in this way, as the wider writings of both authors are more nuanced and informative (Haussler 2007), they are symptomatic of the problems that persist in discussing the formation of post-conquest religion.

Syncretism might be thought of as the initial product of the forces pushing or pulling two cosmological systems together; the clash of world-views often represented by a tiny hyphenation, as in Romano[-]Celtic. The hyphenation inadequately signifies the continuing complex interactions, and syncretism in Roman archaeology has been criticised for offering a simplified, un-politicized and passive fusion; Roman + Celtic = Romano-Celtic (Webster 1997a: 324–328). Syncretism does not easily acknowledge the constant dynamism of transformation and consequent re-constitution, but rather remains defined by its component elements, perpetuating and isolating those recognisable characteristics as if they were frozen at the point of fusion.

Syncretism also presupposes categorisation and is predicated on the initial establishment of an essentialist difference through modern classifications and ethnic constructs. The descriptive use of syncretism relies on assumptions about purity, originality and religions being homologous with cultures as autonomous units. Notions of boundedness of groups, unproblematic continuity of tradition (e.g. Yeates 2007) and homogeneity of material culture continue to be-devil the study of religion in the Roman Empire (e.g. Revell 2007), but need to be recognised as a product of classification and categorisation. When such subjective constructs are imposed on the data, they rarely acknowledge how easily these scholarly categories can be disturbed in practice, through the permeability of cultural boundaries, the ever-changing nature of tradition, and the heterogeneity of practice (Shaw and Stewart 1994).

Homogeneity, heterogeneity and hybridisation

Ultimately, syncretism refers only to the initial blending of heterogeneous traditions, and not the practices and process of continuing religious interaction generating further heterogeneity through time (Graf 2005: 8934–8938). However, syncretism as a term is intimately related to perceptions of the religious imperialism of the Roman Empire and for this reason alone should not be easily discarded. In 1853, the first use of syncretism in the modern history of religions described the Roman appropriation of foreign cults as a strategy for homogenizing the Empire; “all the varieties of mankind...restamped at the Caesarean mint”, (Graf 2005: 8934). The perceived role of syncretism facilitating homogeneity, in tandem with Romanisation, has proved an amazingly long-lived interpretation of Roman provincial religion. The paradox of local heterogeneity of practice and the perceived homogeneity of material forms in the Roman Empire are still the subject of debate (Revell 2007). Rives has suggested that within the Roman Empire ‘the pervasive tendencies towards particularization and generalization provided a framework within which new traditions could be incorporated’ (2007: 182). The monumental forms of ‘Roman’ worship are still often presented as homogenous cult practice that, “held together the Roman Empire and which formed part of a shared Roman identity” (Revell 2007: 211) despite studies that emphasise not just adoption, but also complex adaptation in a provincial context (Webster 1997a; 2003; Woolf 2001: 178). To some extent these are differences in scale of analysis as much as different perspectives. Alleged homogeneity frequently represents the dominant discourse or ideology of the colonial power (e.g. Revell 2007: 227), but should also be ‘interspersed with implicit references to and statements by groups of people who are denied an official voice’ (Spivak 1985; Mattingly 2004; Van Dommelen 2006: 107). Later Prehistoric heterogeneity was not overwhelmed by Roman period homogeneity, but rather “diversity generated by local choice” was replaced by “diversity ordered by imperial power” (Woolf 1997a: 344). Re-casting syncretism as the politics of religious synthesis (Shaw and Stewart 1994) encourages the integration of power relations and identity into the study of religion (Mattingly 2004: 17–22).

The theorisation of vernacular religion changing through time can be conceived in tandem with hybridisation as a continuously generative process. The concept of hybridity has been used in the anthropology of religion as part of the post-colonial critique of syncretism and cultural imperialism. Hybridity acknowledges the production of something new in the ‘middle ground’ (Gosden 2004: 32–34) or “third space” (Bhabha 1990) between coloniser and colonised, dissolving ideological boundaries and demanding radical reconsideration of identifications based on essentialist opposition, like the dichotomy between Roman and Native. In material culture

studies, hybridity can be misused by simply observing the combined appearance of objects of diverse origin in the same assemblage (Van Dommelen 2006: 118–119) and has similar failings as syncretism when considered simplistically as the blending of two previously autonomous cultural formations (e.g. Revell 2007: 221). While considering material culture in terms of hybridity helps to define the physical co-presence of coloniser and colonised, analytical force is lost if merely describing the material correlates of cultural synthesis. Hybridisation needs to be recognised as the dynamic processes expressed through practices, not just material form. Studying underlying practices is fundamental for the successful application of hybridisation into the colonial situations appropriate for Mediterranean and Roman archaeology and is essential for appreciating the diverse methods by which people continually “construct a distinct identity within the colonial context and situate themselves with respect to the dominant i.e. colonial culture’ (Van Dommelen 1997: 309; 2006).

Vernacular Language

Many key terms in religious studies such as syncretism, sacred, ritual and of course religion itself have a semantic origin in the classical languages of Greece and Rome. These semantic roots should not be ignored as they are part of the historical development of the word and help to trace the contours of how the term can be used. The Latin term *vernaculus* means native, household or domestic, and there is also a connotation of slavery from Latin *verna*, a household born slave (Oxford Dictionary of English). Used simply as a descriptive term, these semantic origins might ally vernacular with subaltern identities and the application of postcolonial theory in studies that have focussed on religion in the colonial context of the Roman provinces (Webster 1997a). However, a de-colonized analysis seeks to avoid the extremes of Roman and Native or Romanisation and resistance (Woolf 1997a: 341) Whilst it could potentially encompass a host of identities and avoids the use of ethnic labels, such as Celtic or Romano-British, using vernacular as a substitute for native simplistically exchanges one term for another, and runs the danger of perpetuating the dichotomy with Roman.

In more modern developments, vernacular has been used in a variety of contexts for particular times, places and groups of people, but is primarily defined as the native or indigenous language of a country or a particular locality (Primiano 1995: 42). Vernacular languages and literatures were a historical development from the interaction of Latin with the other languages of Europe, and although this may be conceptually reminiscent of the development of provincial cults, using this linguistic analogy still creates the danger of producing a further dichotomy with Latin. In relation to rationalist scientific language, the vernacular is everyday language as opposed to Latinate scientific nomenclature. Even this modern socio-linguistic use of vernacular is permeated by the dichotomy between official and popular language and the discourse of knowledge and power. Using vernacular as a linguistic analogy for material culture is to be avoided as it continues to produce binary oppositions.

Creolization and Discrepant Identities

The linguistic turn in the social sciences applied language models, derived from the semiology of Ferdinand Saussure, to the study of meaning (Preucel and Bauer 2001: 85–86) and led to the popularity of structuralism as an interpretative tool in anthropology and archaeology. The post-

structuralist critique focussed on a textual metaphor and consequently many archaeologists have promoted the interpretation of material culture being read like a text (Hodder 1986), including Roman archaeologists (Webster 2003: 41; Mattingly 2004: 22). However, both linguistic and textual analogies rely on Saussurean semiology and have come under increasing criticism for the tendency to create dyadic relationships and binary oppositions (Preucel and Bauer 2001: 87–89). Creolization is a socio-linguistic term whereby a new fully formed language develops from two parent languages, and has been proposed as an alternative postcolonial approach to Romanisation (Webster 2001). Webster has argued that, ‘a creole perspective offers insights into the negotiation of post-conquest identities from the ‘bottom up’ rather than – as is often the case in studies of Romanisation – from the perspective of provincial elites’ (2001: 209). Creolization provides a useful counter-balance to the previous elite focus of Romanisation studies (Millett 1990), but ultimately it still needs to be integrated with those top-down approaches it was critical of, in order to represent the full spectrum of Roman provincial and imperial society. Hybridisation is preferred here as a more neutral term with a wider theoretical application (Gardner 2003) and has the advantage of being a non-linguistic theory of cultural synthesis (Van Dommelen 2006).

Emulation strategies and creolization both contribute to the ‘complexities of multi-directional flow in inter-societal contacts’, and the formation of a range of discrepant identities in the Roman provinces (Mattingly 2004: 7). Mattingly has developed the concept of ‘discrepant identity’ through combining Said’s (1993: 35–50) postcolonial analysis of imperial discourse as discrepant experience with creolization theory, and recent work on identity in Iron Age studies (Mattingly 2004: 9). Through consideration of discrepant identities many of the subtle combinations and the contradictions of colonial experience can be accounted for, where a person’s identity and behaviour might be socially contingent and alter according to the context of social interaction. The archaeological record must be thoroughly interrogated for subtle differences in the use of material culture (Van Dommelen 2006: 112–120). Those subtle differences must rely on a close contextual analysis (Van Dommelen 2006: 113) in order to examine the variety of discrepant identities and experiences and assess whether these can be consistently correlated with ‘distinct expressions of identity in society’ (Mattingly 2004: 9). Rather than focussing on ethnic identity (Pitts 2007: 696), vernacular religion considers how diverse identities were negotiated through hybridised ritual practices in specific localised contexts throughout the Roman provinces.

The host of discrepant identities involved in provincial religion provides a more complex picture, avoiding the extreme polarisation of Roman and Native, whilst acknowledging the dialectic between top-down and bottom up approaches (Mattingly 2006: 520). Woolf’s (1997b) discussion of polis-religion demonstrated an analogous dialectic relationship between the public and private cults of the Roman Empire. He concluded that the ‘religious ferment that private religion inadequately describes’ is important for understanding religious change in the public cults, which attempted to marginalise the personal in order to promote the communal (Woolf 1997b: 83). In the oscillating power relationship between official and popular forms of worship, public cults would attempt to naturalize their position, providing a vehicle for patronage and creating community identities that could be personally invested in. The role that vernacular ritualised practice plays in cultural reproduction is a result of this dialectic between public and private or official and popular religion and can be conceived in similar ways to structuration theory and the dialectic between structure and agency (Giddens 1984).

Vernacular practice

A practice approach to vernacular religion is more suitable to archaeological study than using analogy derived from linguistic definitions of the term. Although linguists consider the first form of speech to be comprehended as a child as vernacular, this formative development of practical knowledge brings the term closer to social and practice theory, especially Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus*. Vernacular has developed related secondary meanings of informal, personal, private, and often refers to intimate, domestic or household situations. The wider modern use of vernacular also describes essential features of a particular place or locality (Primiano 1995: 42), but also ranges in scale to practices associated with collective identities. The vernacular may be everyday local language, but also denotes everyday local practices; 'culture-as-it-is-lived appropriate to well-defined places and situations' (Lantis 1960: 203). Vernacular has been used in anthropology and archaeology to refer to the practices involved in creating local architecture, art and crafts as well as the locally situated material products of those activities (Deetz 1977; Johnson 1997; Glassie 2000). The modern sociological use of vernacular is based on the practical, everyday, localised and context specific application of the term, referring to the specific materiality of objects, buildings and even landscapes (Brinckerhoff Jackson 1984).

In the colonial context of the Roman Empire the normative evidence provided by sculpture, altars, votives, and temples as well as the more spontaneous localised practices that adopted, adapted, transformed and reconstituted the available material need not be labelled as either Roman or native. Should they instead be labelled vernacular? The monumentalisation of sacred space in the Roman provinces represents one of the key debates about continuity and innovation. Derks (1998: 168–185) argued that there is no clear evidence for an Iron Age predecessor for the developed Romano-Celtic temple with porticus. However, the addition of the porticus is not as simple as the fusion of a Roman architectural feature onto the basic form of a Celtic shrine. Post-conquest shrines represent a new architectural repertoire, a vernacular architecture that became ubiquitous in the NW provinces.

If most provincial cults were essentially localised how can a vernacular approach help to explain the development of such a widespread form of ceremonial architecture as the Romano-Celtic temple (King 2007)? Although the localised nature of many cults and deities in the Roman provinces suits the local meaning of vernacular, analysis should not be constrained to only the local context. A regionalised group of material culture or a multi-regional style of architecture can still be considered vernacular. The dialectic between the paradox of homogeneity and heterogeneity (Revell 2007), suggests that the scale of analysis affects interpretation, and local context must be integrated with the wider provincial and imperial background (Woolf 2000: 628). Hybridisation theory is capable of ranging from an empire-wide context, bringing diverse beliefs and cult practices into contact, through ever-decreasing scales to the material expression of those wider influences grounded in locally constituted and individually meaningful practice (Van Dommelen 2006). Although vernacular emphasises the local context of material culture, a fuller analysis of ritualised practices is possible through the integration of social, economic, political and geographical factors, broadening the basis of interpretation through multiple levels of contextual analysis. Vernacular religion is the historical product of the continuous dialectic between localised traditions and the numerous influences impinging on cult practice in the multi-cultural context of the Roman provinces.

Describing Romano-Celtic temples as vernacular architecture evokes the most familiar descriptive use of the term. However, modern study emphasises that vernacular architecture should not just be used to classify certain types of building, but should also be a constant meditation on the contingent and cultural nature of those buildings and the activities within them; “Buildings, like poems and rituals, realise culture” (Glassie 2000: 17). Rather than being most useful as a descriptive term, vernacular religion is proposed primarily as a methodological approach that shifts the focus of analysis onto the materiality of the archaeological record (Gardner 2003), and most importantly the practices embedded in context. Discussing ritualised practices in a non-essentialist way demonstrates complexity, but also provides greater subtlety to descriptions of collective identity, power relations, resistance to authority, hegemonic consent, historical processes of change and the complex interactions that continually recreate and reconstitute religious traditions.

Pools of knowledge

The Roman period temple centred on the hot springs at Bath is not of Romano-Celtic type. From its early post-conquest construction the architecture of Bath bears closer resemblance to sanctuaries typical of the Mediterranean world, but this foreignness of form does not mean it should be labelled ‘Roman’. Variations in practices through time demonstrate local adaptation. An initial focus on a monumental altar and open access to the spring had shifted by the third century A.D. when the spring was enclosed and votive offerings became more personal and private. Amongst these offerings was the development of a distinctive rite of depositing curse tablets in the spring. A contrast can be made between the curse tablets written by single named locals and the stone epigraphy from the site, mostly dedicated by Roman citizens, military and foreign visitors (Mattingly 2004: 20). Curse tablets may be a material form and practice adopted from wider Graeco-Roman world, but the exuberant adoption at Bath, the identities expressed through the names of the dedicants and the particular emphasis on theft stakes a claim for the local adaptation of practice. Healing would be a more common feature of hot spring sanctuaries on the continent, but instead the goddess Sulis’ juridical powers presided at Bath. Deposition in the spring, rather than the more usual Greek practice of depositing curses in graves, reflects a localised adaptation of what might otherwise be considered as the adoption of ‘Roman’ religious practice (Mattingly 2004: 19–20). Comparison between local practice and wider comparanda enables variations in practice to be distinguished. The inscribed *patera* recovered from the temple spring can be taken as evidence of ‘Roman’ libations being performed (Revell 2007: 218), but the context of recovery also suggests alternative vernacular rites of vessel deposition in watery contexts that can be compared with practices from elsewhere in Britain (Hunter 1997; Goldberg forthcoming).

The recent discovery of a hoard, structured deposits and other components of ritualised activity devoted to Senua, a local goddess from the locality of Ashwell, Hertfordshire, provides a different example of a spring site. The Ashwell hoard has been compared to similar deposits from Backworth and Barkway, although Jackson considered the two comparanda to be almost entirely lacking in context information (Jackson and Burleigh 2007: 46). In some respects, Backworth differs from the other two as an example of a snake jewellery hoard – complex hoarding compositions incorporating esoteric classical artistic motifs and influences from a variety of mystery cults, formulated in a distinctly British vernacular tradition (Cool 2000).

However, Backworth is an example of a deposit that can be characterised as from a watershed context (Goldberg forthcoming). The lack of precision in recording the find-spot does not allow classification of Backworth as a spring site, like Ashwell, but the place-name allows us to characterise the general locale as a watershed context, due to its location on the northern-most edge of the Tyne river system. Considering the watershed boundaries separating river systems is a useful interpretative tool for contextualising such poorly provenanced antiquarian finds. In addition to similarities in material composition, Barkway (less than 16km to the east of Ashwell) is positioned on the ridge that separates tributaries of the River Quin draining south into the Thames basin from those that drain out north to the Fenlands via the rivers Cam and Great Ouse and although a spring site is not certain, it can be categorised as a watershed context.

As an overarching contextual category watersheds have a flexible utility that encompasses a variety of geographical positions in the landscape from coastal sea scarps defining rivermouths to relatively low-lying ambiguous bogs, to the highest points of the landscape, where hill and mountain separate springs that define the upper limits of river drainage basins. There may be a temptation to attribute this complex geographical awareness to Roman surveying and mapping capabilities, but ritualised activities at watershed contexts can be demonstrated throughout British prehistory (Spratt 1990). The detailed nature of this topographical and hydrographical awareness should instead be attributed to the local inhabitants whose activities and movement through the landscape would contribute to the generational accumulation of knowledge. Just as streams successively feed into larger bodies of water as they flow to the sea so an awareness of local landscapes feeds into larger 'pools' of knowledge that culminate in a regional perspective of drainage basins and how they interconnect. That such potent places in the landscape continued to be focal points into the Roman period should occasion no surprise and illustrates how places can provide the common ground for new creations to flourish through the reconciliation of tradition and innovation.

The local goddess Senua, at Ashwell, is linked through iconography with depictions of Minerva, but direct *interpretatio* never occurs, emphasising the integrity of the local in fusion with a more widely known foreign goddess (Mattingly 2006: 484). Although the hoarding of votive plaques is taken as an indication of a temple treasure, the ultimate context of structured deposition in a pit provides a closer link to numerous other examples of this type of practice. Votive deposition in watery contexts, and construction of the sacred precinct can also be compared and contrasted with numerous parallels elsewhere. Taken together these emphasise the range of practices considered appropriate during the early centuries A.D. Woolf's (2000: 626–28) warning that a focus on a landscape scale of analysis can lead to false impressions of continuity has not been ignored as both subtle and dramatic variations in practice and perception can be revealed. Excavations at the spring sanctuary of Springhead demonstrate how different attitudes to water sources inform a diversity of ritualised practices through time (Andrews 2007). Activity in the Bronze Age focussed on burial around the springs. Deposition in the water source reappears with the construction of the sanctuary site. The Late Iron Age component of the site seems to have been removed from the springs themselves and defined by a boundary ditch and ceremonial way on the slopes above. Various Iron Age pits and structured deposits occur beyond the ditch, and a scatter of Iron Age coins define the ceremonial path, but no Iron Age features have as yet been discovered close to the springs. Springhead demonstrates that a sense of place can be articulated at various spatial scales with different attitudes and values manifested through different practices through time. An acknowledgment of the wider potency of place can provide the common

ground for socio-political transitions and for radically different ritualisation. However, many sites should not be expected to reveal such stark contrasts. A vernacular approach to religion in the Roman provinces should also recognise more subtle variations in the acknowledgment of place and promote discussion of the nuances of practice that are often masked by a focus on ‘Celtic’ tradition and ‘Roman’ innovations.

Vernacular: tradition and innovation

Vernacular practices are often related to ‘traditional’ culture and there is a danger of creating a sense of timelessness. Previous academic constructions of Celtic religion have been criticised for being traditional and timeless (Fitzpatrick 1991) and Romano-Celtic syncretism described as Celtic in tradition (King and Haussler 2007) has been critiqued above. Traditional consciousness and popular religion present related difficulties for postcolonial theory by imposing notions of primordiality and primitivism onto popular beliefs (Patton 2005). However, religion need not be static and conservative. Tradition as transmitted and translated across generations is constantly moving through processes of transformation and re-constitution (Chamberlin 2006). Similarly, vernacular practices have the capacity to develop, evolving according to changes in environmental, historical, social and economic conditions, whilst still being spatially coherent, intimately attached to a particular locale or region. These inter-locking contexts and the myriad of impinging factors all need to be taken into account. In the cultural revolution that swept through the imperial provinces in the first centuries B.C. and A.D., negotiating change and reconciling tradition with innovation were central to notions of collective identity; this common dilemma requires novel solutions according to local circumstances (Woolf 2001: 182).

The *genii cucullati* are often presented as archetypal native or Celtic images (Green 1992). A group of sculptures featuring the cloaked figures of the *genii cucullati*, and the divine marriage of Mercury and a goddess with a vessel are known mainly from southwest Britain, but also appear as individual iconographic motifs on the northern frontier of Hadrian’s Wall. The distribution of this iconographic group have been plotted with reference to the territory of an Iron Age tribal group in order to suggest the cult of a goddess of the Dobunni (Yeates 2007). Iron age burials, Roman period iconography and post-Roman onomastics were used to justify religious continuity through unspecified mechanisms of tribal tradition tied to the landscape (Yeates 2007: 65–68). Similar types of sculpture from elsewhere in Roman Britain are not accounted for. The only place that all the iconographic elements appear together is on a relief sculpture from Bath (CSIR 1.2: 39), where Mercury as pastoral guardian appears with a ram, an embodiment of pastoral fertility, and in combination with the *cucullati* and the goddess. The vernacular approach accounts for the relationship between the symbolic elements of this associated group of iconography through reference to the more prosaic practices of pastoralist production. The goddess’ vessel has been interpreted as a dairy churn and along with the *genii cucullati*, the attributes of these two divine images indexically signify the main products of sheep-husbandry: wool and dairy (Goldberg 2006: 89).

Evidence for the cult of Minerva is notable in southwest Britain and for Yeates (2007) the more classical depictions of Minerva may mask (or reveal) the cult of his tribal goddess of the Dobunni. The presence of a rural shrine dedicated to the goddess is indicated by a collection of sculpture from Well 5 at Lower Slaughter (Yeates 2007: 61). Two examples of Minerva with her head removed were deposited in Well 5 along with other sculptures depicting two

triads of *genii cucullati*, a warrior triad and an altar depicting a local god and a ram. The combination of goddess, local gods, ram and *genii cucullati* from Well 5 at Lower Slaughter invites comparison with the inferences made from a sculpted relief from Bath (Goldberg 2006: 93). The local socioeconomic context of Lower Slaughter demonstrates the importance of sheep husbandry in the archaeological record, with a focus on the secondary products of wool and dairy (Timby 1998: 350, 359, 382, 388–389). The importance of pastoralist production within the local economy can be seen reflected in the range of symbolic elements in the iconography recovered from Well 5. One of Minerva's classical functions was as craft-patron of weaving and spinning and, as with pastoral Mercury from the Bath relief, recognisably foreign forms of material culture and depictions of deity have been locally re-constituted and adapted as locally appropriate representations of the socio-economic context that was fundamental to the lives of local worshippers. These representations may reflect traditional practices of husbandry that can be traced back into prehistory, but they re-affirm the relevance of those practices in the Roman Period. Designating this as 'Roman' or 'native' or 'Celtic' is further complicated by their occurrence in the military context of Hadrian's Wall. The different socio-political circumstances between southwest and northern frontier will be always relevant to interpretation. Dissecting what is culturally Roman or elements of Celtic tradition would detract from the vernacular approach, which recognises these cult images as the reconciliation of tradition with innovation in the Roman period.

Derks' (1998) study of religion in Northern Gaul used an ecological approach that linked differential distributions of altars dedicated to Mars and Hercules with different agricultural and pastoral landscapes. A focus on landscape abstracted as a static influence is bound to result in an interpretation of continuity (Woolf 2000: 626–628) and much of Derks' material could have been marshalled to serve a different thesis that "stressed dramatic change and the interplay and modification of religions" (Woolf 2000: 627). The integration of social, economic and environmental aspects of the wider local context at Lower Slaughter bears many similarities to Derks' approach, but the advantage of vernacular religion is the emphasis on dynamism and complexity. Considering the specifics of depositional context and materiality of the sculpture also reveal changing practice through time. The immediate context of deposition in Well 5 and the slighting of the goddess' sculpture suggest alternative narratives to Yeates' interpretation of continuity from Iron age tribe to Roman *civitas* (2007: 65–68). This final act of deposition at Lower Slaughter probably represents alternative rites from the original intentions of those who commissioned the sculpture. Croxford (2003) has demonstrated preferential selection and fragmentation in the multiple lives of Roman period sculpture. There are many examples of missing heads like the Lower Slaughter goddesses and not all should be attributed to Christian iconoclasm – some may be earlier examples of the rejection of anthropomorphic representations of deities or recognition of the power of such images, but with a different response through alternative rites of deposition (Webster 2003).

Deposition in wells and shafts has been the subject of vigorous debate with older literature seeing these as 'Celtic' ritual sites (Ross 1968) while others argue that the notion of Celtic survivals is an expectation based on back-projection from Medieval insular mythology (Webster 1997b). Some would still interpret the watery context of deposition as representing pervasive links to previous Iron Age practices (Fulford 2001), but Webster stresses that these are "new idiosyncratic rites – which should properly be considered as Romano-British rather than as either Roman or Celtic" (1997b: 140). Webster notes how the "shared ground" between Graeco-Roman

chthonic rites and later prehistoric traditions facilitated the generation of this new form of early post-conquest practice (1997b: 140). New forms of knowledge, new cults and new practices were part of the cultural revolution that swept through the Roman provinces in the first centuries B.C. and A.D. (Woolf 2001: 178). Wells become a significant context for the deposition of tablewares and dining vessels in post Flavian Essex and Herefordshire (Pitts 2007), and these relate to wider shifts in patterns of ceramic consumption, relating to changing expressions of identity in the late first and second centuries A.D. A pre-conquest focus on drinking vessels and commensal politics (Dietler 1999) was gradually replaced after the conquest by the adoption of ceramics associated with urbane dining practices (Pitts 2007: 704–709). Similar trends are noted in funeral practice with certain key individual burials signalling wider social change in the next generation. A richly furnished burial from Folly Lane in Verulamium dating to 50–60 A.D. presages shifts in regional ceramic consumption and depositional practices and exhibits a hybridised identity through the inclusion of material relating to urban-style eating, wine amphora referencing pre-conquest burial and drinking practices in a constructed burial context similar to continental shaft-burial rites (Pitts 2007: 707). This complex range of references may signify changing identities in the generation responsible for the burial rather than the individual themselves. The biological basis of hybridisation fits well with notions of successive generational change.

A broken sculpture recovered from a third century well beneath Southwark Cathedral provided a starting point for Merrifield's (1996) discussion of the British Hunter god. The regionalised cult has been identified in London and the southwest as a particular British response to a wider trajectory of religious reaction to the plagues that swept through the empire in the later second century A.D. Merrifield (1996: 111) tentatively connected this cult to an oracle originating in Asia Minor, which if correct demonstrates how connectivity (Pitts 2008) and the movement of ideas can have far-reaching consequences and local manifestations in an imperial context. The sculpted images of this complex syncretistic deity were described as a conflation of Apollo, an eastern saviour god and a British god of youth (Merrifield 1996). Such combinations have elicited the response that, "the meticulousness of the professional theologian, and modern epigrapher, does not perhaps best lend itself to understanding the *confused* religious beliefs of the ordinary worshipper of the western Roman provinces" [my emphasis] (Drinkwater 1992: 345). Provincial religious expression might appear idiosyncratic to the modern observer, but any lack of understanding and confusion is a result of the rigid classifications of modern study, rather than the meaningful practices of the past worshipper.

The British Hunter god is not an eastern saviour god in Britain; his is a cult localised in London and the southwest that exhibits wide-ranging influences. Hybridised material culture is always situated in a specific localised context, but can still exhibit diverse influences and the vernacular approach to religion distinguishes between origin and local availability. The origin of material culture and its 'original' meaning should not be confused with its new meaning when translated into new contexts and engaged in new practices (Van Dommelen 2006: 119–120). The provenance of material culture is by no means irrelevant, but the fact that this material had been made locally available, through whatever process of acquisition, demonstrates that diverse and sometimes distant influences (although I would hesitate to call these global) are still ultimately manifested in a local context (Pitts 2008). Focussing solely on origin tempts interpretation towards Romanisation and other idealisations of culture-historical classification, including the authenticity of tradition, the autonomy of culture and the essentialism of ethnicity that featured in the critique of syncretism.

Vernacular Religion

Instead of beginning analysis based on two opposing preconceived notions of Roman or native, or ethnic constructs of Roman culture and Celtic tradition, vernacular religion shifts focus to the localised context of the material culture associated with ritualised practices. Roman and native/Celtic have previously acted as two attractor positions in a binary opposition that polarised interpretation and simplified what would have been complex processes in the creation of the syncretised religions of the Roman provinces. However, vernacular should not be used as a simple replacement for native as that would perpetuate dichotomies. Vernacular religion operates in the ambiguous zone between individuals and institutions that could be considered synonymous with Bhabha's (1990) "third space" of colonial situations, the common ground bridging the colonial divide and the dichotomy between Roman and native. The post-colonial critique of syncretism, and integration with hybridisation, takes analysis beyond essentialist categories of Roman and native. The concept of discrepant identities (Mattingly 2004) can help theorise a variety of responses and interactions based on a multiplicity of identities, varying according to context and especially in politically charged colonial situations. However, identity and power need to be more fully considered than space has allowed here.

The methodological approach of vernacular religion has a pragmatic value through its focus on material culture and context, rather than beginning analysis from dichotomous preconceived notions and working towards measuring degrees of influence from component elements. This methodology acknowledges the process of new creations and new forms of expression for older concepts, such as Gods names on altars, and anthropomorphic sculpture, as well as traditional contexts for new material forms through temples, site succession and votive deposition. The full range of practices involved in the production, use and eventual deposition of artefacts can be related to an ever-widening consideration of inter-locking economic, social, political, environmental, temporal and spatial contexts. Religion separated as an isolated institution is considered an unhelpful by-product of western rationalism and modern analysis (Brück 1999), whereas vernacular religion relies on integration with all other aspects of studying the past. The vernacular approach to religion promotes a multi-scale contextual analysis of material culture, from feature to site to landscape context and eventually to the wider provincial and imperial context. Although grounded in the local context and the materiality of the archaeological record the nexus of relationships at work on any practice reaches beyond the local and dictates reference to wider comparanda, precedence and analogy. The power of vernacular religion as an analytical tool resides in this potential for transcendence, connecting up and out to empire-wide concerns, but also down to localised ones. Analysis should begin with the localised, historically situated expression of diverse cultural interests interacting and constituted in a specific temporal and spatial context, which can then be related to ever-wider interlocking contexts. Through a careful critical evaluation of vernacular religion, Roman archaeology has a chance to move beyond the dichotomies of religious syncretism – not by using vernacular descriptively as a simple replacement of native, but by considering the context specific processes of hybridisation and vernacular practice as exhibited through the materiality of the archaeological record.

The vernacular approach to religion has the potential to open up the massive grey area between the black and white of Roman and Native. Syncretism recognises processes of translation involved in the creation of new forms of religion and ritual practice, but hybridisation as an evolving process of generational transformation is preferred over linguistic analogies and binary

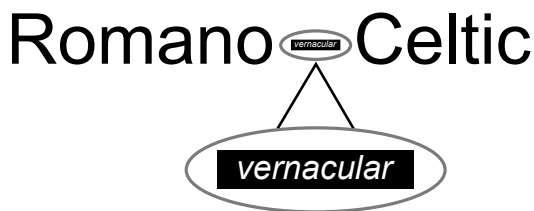


Figure 1: Vernacular religion operating within the hyphenation of Romano-Celtic syncretism.

oppositions. New creations and new meanings emerge through historically and geographically situated interaction. In abstract terms, vernacular religion might be conceived as operating within the hyphenation of Romano-Celtic syncretism, corresponding to the dialectic between many of the dichotomies created by modern analysis. The hyphenation inadequately represents the clash of cosmological systems involved in the creation of hybridised provincial religion. Rather than attempting to isolate the ethnic elements in Romano-Celtic, designate what is culturally Roman or identify Celtic tradition, the focus of study should be on the practices and processes represented by that tiny hyphenation – that is where all the action is (Fig.1).

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